

State job-training program adds green initiative

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DETROIT -- Gov. Jennifer Granholm's No Worker Left Behind program is expanding training offerings, even though the year-old initiative has struggled to pay tuition costs for tens of thousands of displaced workers seeking educational assistance.

Granholm said recently that No Worker Left Behind, which provides as much as \$10,000 in training funds for laid-off or low-income workers, will add a "green jobs initiative" to train workers in alternative-energy industries.

"Michigan's strong manufacturing history and geography make us a natural fit for the thousands of alternative-energy jobs being created each year," Granholm said at a news conference.

The state is allocating \$6 million to the green-jobs effort. No Worker Left Behind began in August 2007 and has served 31,000 workers who either lost their jobs or had family income of less than \$40,000 a year. Granholm's goal is to retrain 100,000 workers by 2010.

Those involved in aiding unemployed and low-income workers say it's one of the best programs they've seen to help Michigan residents raise their standard of living.

Workers can sign up for No Worker Left Behind training at local Michigan Works! offices. They must pursue education for jobs that are considered to be in high demand by the local Michigan Works! offices.

"I think this represents a real effort to reach out to low-wage workers and people who need training," said Sharon Parks, president of the Michigan League for Human Services in Lansing.

But even Granholm administration officials say the program lacks enough funding to retrain the hundreds of thousands of Michigan workers who are being displaced in an economy shifting from low-skilled manufacturing production work to service-sector jobs requiring at least a couple of years of college.

While about 11,000 people have completed training for new jobs, an additional 9,100 are on waiting lists because of funding shortages.

“I would say we have a steady flow of people (who want retraining)," said Bob Straits, executive director of the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, a Kalamazoo organization that oversees the Michigan Works! centers for Kalamazoo and St. Joseph counties.

Straits said the only money allocated to help fund No Worker Left Behind over the past year has been federal funding with parameters that limited the spending to retrain people on public assistance, who are economically disadvantaged, are ex-offenders or meet some other criteria.

“There is enough money for those people who are eligible," he said. “But we had a lot of applicants who didn't meet the criteria."

He estimated that his programs had about \$350,000 in No Worker Left Behind funding to use this year. And retraining for jobs in the health-care industry -- such as medical technicians, nurses and nurses aides -- is big here.

“The biggest population that we continue to work with is dislocated workers," Straits said of workers from automotive suppliers (particularly plastic component makers), paper companies and the pharmaceutical industry. “They are individuals who have been laid off in the last couple of years and who come back for new training."

He said, “At any given time, there are about 200 people who are exploring training opportunities."

Andy Levin, deputy director of the Department of Labor and Economic Growth, said, “The need is as big as the economic crisis in Michigan."

Michigan had 428,000 unemployed workers in June and an unemployment rate of 8.5 percent, the highest in the nation.

No Worker Left Behind will pay up to \$5,000 a year in tuition for up to two years at community colleges, universities and private-sector training schools.

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